

Perez's time as chief marked by controversial legislation

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by Janel Davis
Staff Writer

Many of the issues facing the new County Council president are directly related to his predecessor, Thomas E. Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park.

Perez's presidency was marked as much by his passions as by the controversial bills he pushed forward, including permitting prescription drug reimportation and outlawing predatory lending.

"I'm proud of what we've accomplished," he said in an interview. "We put a lot of tough issues on the table."

Perez intended to make 2005 the Year of the Consumer, combining issues like tax relief and accessible health care with consumer advocacy and protection. His list of legislation, proposed, approved or co-sponsored, generally reflects that goal and can be traced back to Perez's background in civil rights law.

In addition to outlawing predatory lending and November's prescription drug legislation, Perez's accomplishments include unanimous passage of a budget that rolled back property taxes to the charter limit.

"I was fortunate to inherit good things," he said, acknowledging his predecessor, Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring.

Under Silverman in 2004, the council updated the county's moderately priced dwelling unit program, expanded its recycling program and reduced its property tax rate by a penny.

The issues that Perez did not inherit, he created. Although most of his legislation was approved, rarely were the votes unanimous or without intense debate.

Colleagues accused Perez of breaking the law before the drug reimportation bill was



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finally approved last month. The county executive still has not signed the bill.

"I wish people would already be buying prescription drugs from Canada. I wish the program was up and running," Perez said. "The Duncan administration has been dragging its feet."

Perez has criticized Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) for his decision to cut Medicaid benefits for legal immigrants in the country less than five years. To make up for the cuts, the County Council has increased the budget for the county's maternity and pediatric health care programs for low-income residents.

Despite the consumer-driven legislation on Perez's resume, the Clarksburg planning debacle also marks his tenure.

A legislative report cited the council and its hands-off approach to planning issues as a key component to the problems uncovered by the scandal.

"I learned that you need to have a rapid response capacity," Perez said. "Clarksburg taught me that we should have responded earlier. Everything we do should involve keeping faith with taxpayers. That should be a priority."

Still, Perez said, looking back on his year as council president, "I think we're in good shape.

"All the challenges in Montgomery County are reflections of our success in Montgomery County. People want to work here and they want to live here," he said. "My fear, though, is that we are in the process of becoming a community of haves and have-nots, and we have a responsibility to handle that."

But the freshman councilman may not be around to "handle that" in Montgomery County. Perez wants to be the state's attorney general, should the longtime incumbent J. Joseph Curran Jr. (D) decide to retire.

"If Curran decides to run for re-election, then I'll be right there campaigning for him," Perez said.

If Curran does retire, Perez will face a Democratic primary next year with well-funded State's Attorney Douglas E. Gansler, among others.

"I'm gearing up for what might happen," said Perez, a former Clinton administration civil rights attorney and a law professor. "We know the challenges of the attorney general position, which include all the issues I've worked on my entire career."